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One Life before Sunset

By
Serenade (Sirinrampai)

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Morning dewdrops on rice stalks, reflected in the sun, are as beautiful as diamonds.
But the beauty is ephemeral: it comes into being, exists, and then dies.

The Dewdrops of Memory

Imprinting themselves on my childhood memories were those dew-dusted rice stalks at dawn. In the sunlight, the whole field resembled diamonds gleaming and rollicking over a large carpet of green velvet. But dawn's beauty presented itself only briefly. As the sun blazed, the jewel-like dewdrops would vanish, one of nature's magic tricks.

As a child, I awoke at dawn, ran on bare feet along the rugged earth like someone from the Stone Age, one hand carrying a pail, the other a spade, on my right shoulder a bamboo-woven fish trap, on a mission to dig up dung beetles and short-tailed crickets¹ to roast for breakfast before heading off to school. I never felt any misery, pain or disappointment. I did not know "rich" from "poor".

How vast and modernized the world was out there, I did not know... But my environment goaded me to scrape through, amid the cursed parchedness of southern Isaan², along with my five other siblings.

I was the third child, the biggest dreamer and the laziest of all. In the rice season, while everybody was being diligent, I found various excuses to avoid heavy work. My favourite chore was herding the cattle out to feed. I delighted in digging for dung beetles, rice-field crabs and catching crickets and frogs for my mum to cook. I became an amateur entomologist and botanist and

¹Short-tailed crickets (jipom): a type of cricket with round shape and long antennae that live in burrows dug into fields and rice paddies – Author.

²Isaan: the northeast region of Thailand, known for its droughts – Translator.

watched the endless rice fields turn from green to gold with the seasons.

In the summer, the cicadas' songs echoed through the forest. The wafting wind carried the sweet scent of wild flowers into every nook. As the rains arrived, we listened to the cacophony of croaking frogs and screeching crickets.

Each May, our village held a traditional rocket festival to worship Phya Taen¹. It was now that I heard the sounds of my dad's free-reed mouth organ through the giddy smell of rice wine. The stronger the wine, the more rousing his rhythmic movements. Others then stepped in to join him, each bringing their unique talents. Some sang, danced, recited folk poems. Others used kham phya² to woo each other. Others merrily engaged in the rauchier and more comic kham soi³.

As a child with an active imagination, I used to think life was a kind of beauty. The villagers did not vastly differ in class. We were neither rich nor poor. We all lived together as one big family. We traded what we had, and money meant little to us. Nobody complained about their debts. Life in the countryside was full of smiles and laughter. Our minds were as pure as the dews which glistened in the rays at dawn.

¹Phya Taen: believed by northeastern Thais and Laotians to be the god of rain. Each May, before the rice season begins, villagers hold a rocket festival as a rainmaking ritual in the hope that Phya Taen will grant them seasonal rain – Author.

²Phya: a meaningful adage roughly translated as “wisdom”, “philosophy”, “maxim” and “aphorism”; a spoken riddle with loose rhymes that is lyrical in its stresses. A form of rhetoric which requires a sharpness of wit, and intelligence, it must be pithy and succinct. The listener has to process the riddle to discover its true meaning – Editor.

³Soi: an art of oral literature infused with the humour of northeastern Thais. Kham soi had its origins around the same time as mo lam glon. At present, it has seen some fusion with mo lam khu and mo lam ploen. Though most kham soi have a strong sexual flavour, the villagers only see this as comic and entertaining – Editor.

This image of the beauty of the dewdrops, and of life, kept teasing and nestling up to my emotions into my adolescent years.

Then one by one a few truths tugged open my eyes...

I remember how once my grandfather, who was partially paralysed, had come to stay with us at our hut. At dawn he rallied us to collect dew from the emerald rice fields, since he knew that was when it was most abundant.

I wondered what he was going to do with the dew. He said it might work as an elixir to heal his paralysed half.

So we each raced into the fields with a bathing cloth, which we wielded to collect as much dew as we could to press on Grandfather's paralysed half, hoping it would be the elixir he claimed. Only Grandfather knew about this secret elixir. Though he never had the chance to tell of its properties, as several years after this Grandfather left us forever...

Speaking of our ancestors, Grandmother was really our last remaining book of historical records. She could remember certain things about the past, though these have greatly faded. In our times, the past has become nothing more than entertaining anecdotes and folklore told as bedtime stories.

The story of our ancestors is not unlike many others in this world. Like those stories, it has been burnished and obliterated by war and the passage of time. From what Grandmother could remember, our ancestors inhabited a town in western Laos. Great-grandfather once ruled that town. The exact time period could no longer be pinpointed, having been passed down through the generations. We knew they had to flee their home during a war and had migrated across the Mekong into the northeast of Thailand, where they then scattered. As time passed, they forgot the roots of where they came from. What remained traceable were their dialect

and timeworn traditions.

Grandmother often bemoaned the loss of invaluable precious stones which Great-grandmother had hidden from bandits in that troubled time. She had ordered them to be placed in jars used for pickled mudfish and carried from the town. With news of rampant bandit attacks, the cumbersome jars were buried under a large ta sua tree. Great-grandmother instructed her children to return for them.

After the war ended, Laos remained a closed country for many years. Great-grandmother passed away, and none of the younger generation cared to return.

The funny thing is the later generations tend to think they have no history. The search for their roots does not interest them. These days, figuring out who is whom to whom in the family tree is enough of a headache. Tracing that lineage to its start becomes something too distant, like a tale that is told and then forgotten.

Dad was the “pitiful dream hunter”. He lost both of his parents when he was ten. His mother came from an old family of noblemen and had inherited hundreds of rai of land.

Back then people were uneducated about the law. Their will was expressed verbally among relatives and those close to them.

The same was true of Grandmother and Grandfather. Before they passed away they entrusted their land to the care of older relatives. The land was to fall to Dad and his sister when they came of age. But when the time came, the relatives told Dad they had sold everything to raise him and his sister.

This was a blow to Dad. He could not dispute their claim or he would be seen as an ingrate. Dad had to let the matter lie. And he began his wanderings.

Dad later joined the conscripts and served his country for two years. Once demobilized, he visited his relatives in a different

district. It was there that he met Mum.

Their elders became enthusiastic matchmakers. Mum kept running away in her shyness. She had no wish to marry. In the end she could not resist the coaxing of Grandfather and her relatives and reluctantly agreed to a wedding.

Mum told me the older generations favoured arranged marriages between men and women who never knew or loved each other. Rather bizarrely, most of these couples experienced long-lasting marriages. In modern times, married couples who live in their own homes constantly find themselves filing for divorce.

In the beginning, Mum was impressed by Dad's diligence. He did not drink or smoke. But after several years passed, this perfect man became the opposite of the man he had been.

It began soon after the wedding. Dad and Mum built their own home near Grandmother and Grandfather, who lived in a different district. Back in Dad's hometown, he used to have a friend named "Kha", whom he loved and trusted. They had grown up together.

One day, this man asked Dad to become his agent. Dad was to find some cattle. The man promised some profit for the owners, along with a cut for Dad.

Dad gathered some cattle and herded them to him as agreed. After the delivery, his dearest friend disappeared into thin air.

Dad told me this Kha had many debts and had accidentally killed a man. He was on the run and was hiding in some cave.

By association, Dad became a debtor. He could not pay anyone the promised profits. Dad had to travel to collect the money from his dear friend's family. Sometimes he would be gone for months. Each time he only returned with a minimal amount, enough to pay a few of the debts.

Sometimes he let Mum undertake these journeys for him.

When I was around six, I followed her along on one of them. We had to take the public bus from our district into the city. The journey spanned many kilometres.

The rest of it was continued on foot as we inquired for the friend's house through a network of small alleys. I was feeling hungry and woozy. Mum bought some snacks and water to ease my hunger.

Mum's face was full of hope for a substantial sum from this debtor. We could then use it to pay everybody else. But the friend's wife eagerly greeted us with cold water to disperse our thirst.

Misery was clear on her face. She openly bared her heart to Mum. Her husband had chosen the wrong path. He had accumulated innumerable debts, killed a man and run. He had left his wife and children to carry his debts. They were visited by creditors every day. Raising her children alone in a big city only added to her predicament.

Mum did not collect the debt as most creditors did. She empathically enquired after her debtor's welfare. And so it was that one woman suffering hardship travelled many miles only to hear the distress of another.

They talked about how fate had tirelessly played jokes on them. I remember being a little cranky and wanting badly to sleep. Mum told me to be patient. When we were finished, we could get some food from one of Dad's relatives.

Feeling pity for this woman in their shared fate, Mum told her she would return the next month. Back then the available forms of communication were limited. Things had to be arranged verbally so the other party could prepare beforehand.

We left to find the home of Dad's uncle, where we would ask to stay the night. I remember this journey as the first proper adventure of my childhood. It gave me a taste of what women have

to endure.

Mum said women need tolerance. A woman's worth is not limited to her duty as a follower. Thai society sees men as the front feet of the elephant, the leaders of their families. But from all around me, I have learned how some men do not act as the front feet, leading their hind feet on the right path. Instead they shift all their weight for the hind feet to bear.

As Mum kept returning empty-handed, the unpaid villagers raised a ruckus. They wanted to take things up with Dad. Our home became the local court for their appeals.

This drove Dad to the bottle. Some days he drank heavily to forget his troubles. When he could no longer stand the state of things, he decided to move us back to the old village where he had first met Mum. There her parents had a few hundred rai of land where we could farm some rice.

As I started primary school, Dad became a wonder architect and builder. His dedication to each house he built was both a source of pride and a catastrophe.

Dad had a grand view of things. He was an optimist and a dreamer. He liked to talk of future plans for the family. But all these plans evaporated by the morning, promptly replaced by a string of new ones.

Just like each of the houses, which we'd better call huts. These huts had floors laid with poor quality wood panels. The walls were woven with double strips of bamboo. The walls' insides were layered with the right thickness with bai tong kung¹ from the forest. In the Isaan dialect, these walls were called fah kud tae or fah bai

¹Bai tong kung: leaves from *kung* trees, a medium to large perennial tree found in all regions of Thailand. Most of its parts, such as its leaves, trunk, flowers and sap, can be used – Editor.

tong kung. The roofs of cut grass, gathered from the edges of the rice fields, kept out the elements. After barely one year, Dad would begin looking for the next prime location in some corner of that vast land inherited by Mum, where he could erect his new hut.

Grandmother and Grandfather later gave Mum their old house in the village. Dad renovated it, tore it down to build it up again. We children were very excited and eagerly awaited this new home. We waited and counted the days. Soon enough we became its new occupants. It was a half-finished house in need of additions. Its construction was put on hold when our budget ran out. Dad said we would keep adding to it as more money came in. And one day it would be finished.

I used to think Dad's unending series of projects was something to keep his mind off the debts. It mirrored his excessive drinking. He would rather forget all his troubles if he could.

After his career as a cattle agent, Dad became the village butcher. Villagers felled their cattle and sliced their meat into equal piles, which were then bought to cook with. Those who could not afford the meat could pay for it after the harvest.

Our family mainly grew sticky rice. Outside the rice season, Dad grew vegetables and wove fish traps. He laid these traps in streams and ponds and caught fish for Mum to cook. At night he went out with a rod to catch frogs and fish in the rice fields.

When winter came, after the rice harvest, Dad made traps for greater bandicoot rats and yellow-legged buttonquails. At night he went out to catch owls. Some days he caught more. Some days he caught less. On days when we had abundant frogs, fish or vegetables, he gave some to Mum to sell at the village. We kept the money for use in difficult times.

Forty years ago, nobody had a social security card or a

universal health insurance card – today’s 30-baht Gold Card. Those who fell ill were left to their own devices. They brewed herbs from their gardens, which sometimes worked wonders. For a serious illness, they had to be transported to the district or city hospital on cattle-drawn carts, which could take days. At other times their loved ones had to watch as they slowly succumbed to their illness.

Not long after this, the first cars arrived. The villagers exulted as if heaven had blessed them. As new technology came along, poorer households sold the cattle in their pens. The money was used to buy tractors, cultivators and other amenities, which were produced in an endless enticing stream. There were fewer and fewer of the once abundant cattle.

The day came when electricity and black-and-white television arrived at our village. I can see that day in front of my eyes. The elders clasped their hands in prayer. A few shouted like lottery jackpot winners:

“Gracious god is upon us!”

From that day onward, the home with the first black-and-white television became the village mingling place. Its clever owner began selling strange products obtained from the city. And business was brisk.

News lovers followed every detail for morning debates at the temple. Soap opera fans eagerly awaited their shows. The moving pictures, and their product advertisements, began to pervade the small and once peaceful world, not unlike a drug unintentionally injected into our system.

Little vacant hearts began to build castles in the air. The villagers dreamed of a future filled with amenities and took out all varieties of loans. The old way of life was forgotten. And old traditions began to wear thin.

These developments had a great impact on our family. Dad was brilliantly inspired by his high-flying friends (who believed in easy money). After years of farming rice, he still saw no path to riches this way and decided to start his own business like the rest of them.

Dad first mortgaged our land through the bank for an investment. His first attempt was a failure due to lack of experience. And we lost over half of our land. This did not deter Dad, who re-mortgaged the rest of the land for a six-wheel truck he could drive for hire. The truck was repossessed in less than a year. We came out of it with no land, no truck and a mountain of debts. In the end, Dad turned to my eldest sister's husband, an army medical officer, for a down payment on a new truck from which he planned to sell fermented mudfish.

My memories of Mum in my teenage years were filled with the rotten stench of mudfish emanating from earthen jars and old rusted tin cans. Then there was the smell of rice bran roasted over long hours until fragrant, the sight of Mum's thick hands folding the mudfish, salt and roasted bran, one jar at a time.

Mum had an ingenious method behind the beautiful colour of her pickled mudfish. She avoided food colouring. Instead she created her own dye by boiling the leaves of the horse tamarind tree. Once the water turned a red-tinted brown, it was left to cool then filtered, poured into the earthen jars and stirred through with a paddle. The final step was to stick her finger into it and bring it up to taste. If not too salty or too mild, it was considered finished. Mum would ladle the mudfish into several layers of plastic bags and into tin cans. These were loaded onto the truck and peddled among the villages.

Mum said those who bought her pickled mudfish knew nothing of its preparation. But they remembered the flavours they enjoyed

and would pass that along by word of mouth. Whether or not they returned as customers was a secret its sellers could not know.

The pickled mudfish business was like any other job. We had to fully commit and be mindful of consequences. Giving the customers low-quality products was like handing over a grenade and asking them not to come back.

Mum was a woman of few words. She liked to cite moral rhymes and give her children warnings when she felt like it or as the situation warranted. Then again, her excessive docility towards Dad sometimes annoyed me.

I once asked Mum why she did not divorce Dad since it didn't seem he paid her any mind. Mum said one day when I had a family of my own, I would know this was easier said than done.

Mum was like the rice which took in everything, including the harmful chemicals scattered by Dad. Though bitter at his abuse, Mum never grumbled. The abuse only made her work harder than before, unlike Dad, who was a fun-lover and socializer. Some days Dad left my second oldest brother to accompany Mum and her pickled mudfish. My brother had to abandon his dream of a university degree since he had no time to study for his exams.

On days when Dad came home drunk or angry, we could hear him shouting from afar. Mum would run to hide with her relatives. When Dad didn't see her, he vandalized everything. Even Grandmother, who moved in with us after Grandfather passed away, was not exempt and was scolded and insulted regularly.

No one could predict his ups and downs. He could be decent for a short while then suddenly turn intolerable. We did not know what had happened to the man who had once loved his family. Each day I lived in fear of his booming shouts, ready to run and hide from his sight. We lived together like strangers and avoided any conversation or eye contact. Soon our worlds began to grow

apart.

For all his hot temper, the damage he wrought and his repeated failure at everything, Dad strangely possessed a different side to him that was like a saint or selfless prince. He never hesitated or bided time at a request for help, but offered it unasked.

I often saw him give things freely to friends and strangers. During my childhood, he welcomed strangers as guests into our home: travelling salesmen, itinerant movie-showers, pool diggers, even the mentally ill and homeless.

Dad often acted as guarantor for others and once handed the deed for his land to a friend who was known to be a fraud. Though the friend never bothered to redeem Dad's mortgaged land, Dad only laughed hehe and sang a song of forgiveness for his deceiving friend. I used to wonder what Dad was really thinking. Had he meant for life to turn out this way?

There were very few times in life where I could relate to him fondly. The first of these was when I was around seven or eight years old. Dad had drawn a picture of a flower with countless layers of petals. He had also coloured it. It made me marvel at the wonder of being an adult. It was then that my love for art began.

Another time was the first day of my orientation at Rajabhat University in the north of Isaan. My parents had been busy scrambling for money. But they managed to drive me. During the drive, Dad spoke to me as a reasoned man for the first time.

“We have no more land left. The only thing we can give you is your education.”

The pickled mudfish business gave us enough to live on for a while. There was not a man in any village who did not know of Dad as “Old Pudgy Man, Delicious Pickled Mudfish”.

But everything with a beginning must have an end. Less than

a month after my graduation, the truck was taken from us by my eldest sister's husband. The reasons behind this were uncomfortable for everyone. My sister and he had divorced. And he had asked us for everything he had a claim in, including the truck. Even so, Mum remained the optimist.

“It's all right. At least we used it to put one child through college.”

Our family had lost almost everything. Fortunately, the buyer of our land was a relative of ours and was lenient with us. We were allowed to farm some rice and vegetables on a little over ten rai at the edge of the land. These areas had been omitted from the deed. What we grew became our livelihood.

We started again from square one. Each lesson may not have proved anything. It only came and passed, like the dews which gathered each night. Our lives are no different. We keep treading the same tired circle. We may have been tested severely, with obstacles difficult to surmount. But many are willing to return to that old familiar road, condensing into one bead of dew after another, vanishing into nothingness at the break of dawn.



On a survey with new students in a mountainous area near the Thai-Burmese border with a group of teachers and military rangers.

Like Falling Betel Blossoms

Before we settle down someplace in life, the little things we discover along the way accumulate into a fund of experience. But no matter our beginnings, each of us wants success as our end. Of course no one ever speaks of success without this fund of experience. The tradeoff is an iron-clad rule. But sometimes we have only a narrow array of choices at hand...

A few months after graduation, I was selected as a volunteer graduate for my sub-district in a government programme employing out-of-work graduates on one-year contracts. But after three months of work, I felt strangely out of place and later made my way to Chanthaburi for a teachers' examination. I ranked fifteenth on the list. While waiting for my placement, I wanted to harvest what life had to offer in the north of Thailand. At the examination I had met "Phi Noi", a native of Nakhon Pathom. She had spoken of a friend who was teaching on the mountains of Mae Hong Son. If I was interested, she would contact her for me. I was ecstatic. We agreed on a date to meet this friend of hers after returning from our exam.

I then travelled back to Isaan, handed in my resignation as a volunteer graduate, said goodbye to my parents and packed my bags for the journey of my heart's desire.

After my post-high school job search in Bangkok, this was only the second occasion where I was as enraptured as a child at her first theme park. Though no familiar face awaited me, I was brimming with hope. It was as if I had been gifted with magical wings and was ready to face all of life's adventures. I had no

concerns or worries. The mere thought that I would step beyond the confines of my village filled me with delight.

As my journey began, with a long-haul bus from Isaan and a transfer in Bangkok, I was still in high spirits. But as I continued to the intermediary Phi Noi in Nakhon Pathom, where she was to take me to her friend, now back from Mae Hong Son, my heart began to waver. My wallet was on the thin side. If her friend refused to take me to the mountains I would have to return to my village. The thought left me anxious and confused. But at our meeting, Teacher Bee's familiar and casual ways restored my hopes. With our arrangement in place, I had only to wait for our departure to Mae Hong Son.

On our way there, Teacher Bee told me we would have to meet another teacher who owned a truck in which we could load our necessities. Before we could begin our ascent, we stayed many days at the district residence to await the other teachers' arrival at the start of the semester.

In the month of May there were frequent rains. The air was perpetually moist, with heavy fog. Not only did I have to adjust to the other teachers, I also had to acclimatize to the land and its climate.

When the teachers had gathered, along with their newly bought supplies, it was time for us to set off. The drive up the mountains in the rainy season was a vicious ordeal for us. I suddenly understood what people meant when they spoke of life "hanging by a thread" or "on a precipice". Those craving a taste of hardship and perseverance are due for a month or two in the northern mountains, where they will be completely cut off from civilization, with no electricity or transportation.

That day the road was drowning in slush, as it had been raining incessantly for days. Some of its sections had been claimed by

gushing streams. Whenever the truck lost traction or swerved too close to the edge of a high cliff, we'd hear screams of terror. I held fast to the truck, my eyes shut to glimpses of what lay below. There was none of the pleasant scenery and rolling fields of flowers I knew from movies. I was somewhat disappointed. But since I could no longer change my mind, I had no choice but to continue on this toilsome journey.

At dusk we were mere kilometres from our destination when our four-wheel-drive, chauffeured by a kind forest ranger, became mired. All of us got out and pushed, but to no avail. The revving of the engine only dug us further into the mire. We were soon spotted by a group of military rangers driving past in their own four-wheel-drive. The teachers put their palms together and greeted one of the uniformed men as Colonel Something-or-Other. The colonel beckoned his subordinates to help.

Teachers and military rangers pulled together with every method imaginable to rescue the four-wheel-drive from its ditch. We brought out a chain from the back of the truck and wound it around the wheels. Only then did we manage to extricate ourselves. I looked from one of us to the other. We were all caked in mud. A light drizzle had begun. As darkness encroached, all varieties of insects descended on us. This left a first-time visitor like me in a daze for days. I thought to myself... "This is hell if there ever was one!"

Our chauffeur, the forest ranger, said to me:

"Here we live together as friends and family. We'd have a hard time of it if we didn't."

The hurdles we encountered, severe as they were for us mere mortals, allowed me to witness the touching kindness of those who willingly extended their help. I no longer doubted how the teachers could survive these mountains, so removed from the rest of the

world, for so many years. Many may have chosen to be stationed in some town, replete with its amenities, and only a quick hop from their families. Instead they chose to live among these people in pursuit of their life goals.

In the week of our arrival, school had not yet started. The teachers first had to arrange a survey of new students and give the school a thorough spring cleaning. Since there were no janitors, they organized a roster among themselves. The teachers agreed that while I remained as a volunteer teacher they would cover my food and expenses as compensation for my help. I was free to stay as long as I liked.

My time on the mountains was at first exhilarating. I delighted in the zests of life far different from those of the village I had left behind. I joined the survey of new students led by a group of military rangers. We trekked up steep mountains and wallowed in the clouds of mist floating gingerly at their peaks. Ahead of us the mountain range extended its intricate folds and layers as rolling waves in the sea. I stood in awe of this natural piece of creation hitherto unknown to me. As we descended the sheer face, however, we had to dash desperately from tree to tree. By the time we reached the military camp, most of us were wrecked, me included. For this invaluable experience, I paid the price of my toe nails, as their contusions soon grew rotten and took years to heal.

The experience brought me closer to nature's perfection, which we each carry within. I used to think a life in nature, far from the trappings of modernity, would ease a restless mind. I could have happily spent the rest of my life nestled among these mountains. I had forgotten that as humans we were inclined to want much more. I was suffering from a strange illness. Each late morning I was hit by a headache and drowsiness so severe that my work also suffered. After a month at the school I bade goodbye to

the teachers during their town run. I was to return to Isaan, where I anxiously awaited my results. Perhaps luck would hasten my employment.

But when days passed with no news of my assignment, my morale crumbled. It was an investment that yielded nothing. I was just like Dad, who mortgaged his land for a scheme which incurred only debts and piling interest.

My place on the biennial lists was no more than a wafting breeze, a respite lasting the blink of a dream and dying with the announcement of the next examinations. The current lists were summarily scrapped. Everybody blamed my art education major.

“Why didn’t you choose science or maths or English? Even if you’d come lower on the list, they would have called you in a long time ago.”

This thorn perpetually pricked at my heart. Somebody once recounted an anecdote I could not verify:

“Anyone can teach art. Some schools that don’t have enough teachers let their janitors teach it. The government doesn’t see it as very important. They’re better off using the money to hire someone else.”

Fed up with examinations, I collected my textbooks and donated them to those pursuing an academic career. I then began to lock myself in my room like a hibernating frog. I wanted to write short stories and novels and send them off to publishers. Though out of work, I could perhaps scrape together a small income for my family. If only it were that easy.

I was rejected by all the publishers. This, combined with the disappointments bombarding me from all sides, led to depression. Each day I wondered why I was alive. My gaze rested on the betel blossoms at my window which came to bloom and then fell to the

stagnant mire below. Not one of the blossoms yielded a nut.

My life was no different from that bouquet, frail, vulnerable, confused, with nothing to hold on to. I could see no light at the end of the tunnel. Only Grandmother and Mum stepped in every so often and asked: “Have you eaten today?” “Are you well?” “Why don’t you go outside and see people?” None of it worked.

I was tired of people. I wanted to run off into the wild or into some cave where nobody knew me. But alas. Could I go through this world guarding my autonomy from all invasions? I dreaded my own thoughts, which quickly began to spiral. I was afraid to work for organizations, subject to others’ commands. I felt it would rob me of my identity and contentment.

Rice farming was no longer an option. Not only did we have no land left, I was also never attentive enough to its nuances. All I could do was rack my brain for ways to free myself from society’s binds. Months passed. I still had not left the confines of my room.

One morning I woke knowing I would only come to the same old answers. I had no wish to wake. I lay in bed and opened my door to no one. I resented trips to the bathroom, and even food.

When a few days had passed and I had not relented, Grandmother enlisted the help of a neighbour to pry open my door. I could not stand the noise and dragged myself to meet them.

Everyone was horrified. I must have resembled a victim of a months-long illness. For the first time in days, I was confronted with the existence of others.

Grandmother tried her best to pinpoint my illness. She ran her wrinkled hands over me, pressing first on my abdomen. The soreness pierced through me. I could no longer hold back my tears.

Grandmother went pale. She called for a neighbour who was a staff member at the district hospital. But she, too, could only surmise that I had the flu.

Mum frantically arranged for a car to take me to the hospital. But I was stubborn as a mule and refused to be taken. I knew we had not a single baht left. Dad had been staying with my sister in Bangkok for months, and his responsibilities fell to Mum.

When no one would lend Mum any money, Grandmother undid a tightly tied handkerchief with her trembling hands. Inside it was the three hundred baht she had painstakingly saved for illnesses that plague those in old age. It was now to be used on a youngling like me.

I left for the hospital with the image of a frail elderly woman, sitting with her knees to her chest, gazing rather intently at the receding car.

Grandmother could not weather another loss. The departures of her husband, her eldest son, her daughter and her youngest son called to mind the betel blossoms which fall from their bouquet, the sweet hint of their scent transfigured to that of the utapid¹ as the petals rest in their mire.

I was diagnosed with pyelitis and admitted for close to a week. Mum kept a careful watch. She did not get a full night's sleep between checking my IV and helping me to the bathroom. But she never once grumbled. Instead she reminded me of some dharmic truths. Once, I asked her:

“Why are we born? We have to die anyway.”

Mum had no ready answer.

“I don't know why we are born. When I was younger, I wanted to study. But Grandfather said I was a woman and I did not need an education. I was to marry and raise my children. That's not how it is for you. Women now have opportunities. Why don't you go out and look for them? You might just find something.”

¹Typhonium trilobatum (L.) Schott; an aroid known for its offensive stench.

Mum spoke of those who were truly underprivileged. Lack of education restricted them to a life of ignorance. I felt ashamed. I was close to thirty yet unable to embark on life for fear of conformity.

On the morning of my discharge, Mum went out to get some congee and a few sweetmeats, since she knew I had grown tired of hospital food.

Mum asked if I wanted to eat on the back balcony, where many patients mingled. I agreed. I had been cooped up inside with no sun for days.

It was a morning I would never forget. The two of us eating together in the early morning sun. The congee was particularly delectable, and the sun oozed a strange soothing warmth.

Inside, the room was crowded. The mostly elderly patients lay immobile, awaiting the next doctor's inspection. Some had had amputations due to diabetes. Others were equipped with oxygen masks and an array of dangling tubes, straddling, as it were, the thin line that separates life from death. I felt a lump as the congee slid down my throat. It suddenly became clear to me how brief life is.





Sometimes life is like a game. Our odds depend on how well we control that game. Each of our paths in life is like this. Right and wrong depend on us; black and white appear the same. Throughout life we should not be careless.

Game Over

After I recovered from my illness, I told Mother I wanted some money to cover travel costs to Bangkok to find work. Mother was overjoyed and did her best to help.

The first thing I did on arrival was hop on a bus to the Thai Red Cross Society early that morning to donate my organs. This proved quite an ordeal. I almost gave up and turned back. I was a stranger to transportation in the capital and had boarded the wrong bus. The day consisted of me hopping on and off buses in the heat, having thoroughly lost my way. I kept thinking how even the path to good deeds is rife with obstacles. The devil is always lurking, eager to test our resilience and our will: would I donate my organs or go home? Luckily the angels won out. They were telling me: you must go. You must do this. This is your chance.

Strangely enough, when I did pull it together and ask other pedestrians directions, they eagerly and painstakingly pointed the way. It was as if they had wanted to bestow their blessings and send me on my way.

After much ado, I arrived at the Thai Red Cross Society well into the afternoon. Once I had signed on the dotted line, it was as if my body no longer belonged to me. My soul was its inhabitant. I then called my mother. If one day something was to happen to me, if my brain no longer functioned, she would inform the Thai Red Cross Society to collect my body. Perhaps it would save someone else's life. This was my first promise to my mother and myself: I was to live the rest of my life to the fullest and stop fretting about whether I was ready.

In Bangkok I moved back and forth between the homes of my eldest sister and my uncle's son. I visited countless businesses, applying for jobs in art and magazines, as a journalist or illustrator. As I finished filling out each application, my mind brimmed with hope and anticipation. But after days passed and I heard nothing, I grew dejected. My mind withered. Darkness set in on the road before me. I began hearing the voices of those I knew, reprimanding and ridiculing my ideals. During this wait, I came to understand what a job hunt truly entailed. I was also witness to the games of life as played by those around me.

"Plaiew", my cousin's wife and my hostess, was particularly warm to me. She at times understood me as if she occupied a seat somewhere in my heart. During our conversations she had the kind of psychology that allowed me to open up. I grew to love speaking with her about my dreams and ideals, more so than with my cousin.

Plaiew's open, good-humoured nature charmed everyone. I myself often envied her. But as long as we remain travellers on our journeys and are constantly plagued by temptations, it is too soon to draw conclusions.

One day Plaiew confided: "The game's almost over." I couldn't wrap my head around it. How could someone so cheery and happy-go-lucky say such a thing? I wanted to be polite and didn't prod any further. But I did notice a change and a certain distance between her and my cousin. I first brushed it off as one of those domestic quarrels, reasoning it would soon pass. But there was more to their story than I thought.

I had recently submitted an application to a certain business in Nonthaburi. Two days later, Plaiew told me:

"Phi, someone called. They want you to go for an interview tomorrow."

"Where?" I asked.

She stammered: “I don’t know. I can’t remember,” then asked, “Well, where did you apply?”

I paused, wondering: Could it be? It had only been two days. Would they call me in so quickly? The following day, I went back to Nonthaburi to find out. Once there, I sat and waited. But nobody paid me any mind. Bracing myself, I walked up and asked: Had they contacted so and so for an interview for such and such a position? Everybody looked me up and down with something akin to bafflement. One of the women called out to the others:

“Did someone call her in for an interview?”

Another said, somewhat condescendingly:

“Really? A stylist? We can’t just take any random person as a stylist.”

My heart sank to my ankles. I left with an ashen face. It seemed this “stylist” was mighty important. Who was I to put myself up for such a job without even knowing what it entailed?

When I reached the bus stop, I called my cousin-in-law at her home.

“Was it really this place? Maybe you misunderstood?” I asked.

“I don’t know. How should I know?” She replied.

From the way she spoke, I could guess something was up. I told her I was tired and had had enough of job hunting for the day. She went quiet, then said at her end:

“You should come back. I have many things to tell you.”

I arrived to find Plaiew gulping back Thai herbal whisky, her face a jaundiced yellow, eyes wild with fear. Picture some poor animal moments before slaughter, or a thieving youth being interrogated by the police. Plaiew was no different.

I was stunned. The colour drained from my face. My heart was thumping in my chest. I could not guess what had happened.

Plaiew, still in her early twenties, began her complex tale of marriage, no less complex than a prime-time soap opera. Truth be told, I felt for her and pitied her.

She said life is a game we play with our feelings. We drag others in to play. Our odds depend on how well we control that game. We will never know how much we can bear. Not without betting the rest of our lives.

I was stunned. I could only stand there and swallow. Having heard such a real-life saga, I was suddenly no more than a naïve child, ignorant of the ways of the world.

“I wanted revenge. He betrayed me for another woman. I wanted to get him back for it. I wanted to hurt him a hundred, thousand times more than he hurt me.”

Hearing this, I grew even more perplexed. What I saw from the outside was a perfectly suitable match. They had been lovers since school. Plaiew was the youngest daughter of a loving, well-to-do family. She had left everything to be with my cousin. With a love such as theirs, should they not persevere in the face of obstacles? Should their path not be paved with roses?

But life is not a novel where once a couple overcome their hurdles, they marry and live happily ever after. For real-life married couples life must go on. They are tested by problems at every turn. How are they to know where life will lead them? Plaiew might be right: “Life is a game. We bet with the rest of our lives. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. We either win or we lose.”

And so Plaiew took out her revenge on her husband by taking a lover for herself, much as he had done to her. Things got out of hand. She was now two months pregnant and tearing her hair out. She must have been close to breaking point – the game almost over, as she had said – to tell me all this.

“If he finds out I’m pregnant, he’ll kill me. These past months

together, we never once touched each other.”

She recounted what had transpired for the day: I had gone out for my interview and her husband had left for work. Plaiew had arranged for her lover to come over. But for reasons unknown to her, her husband returned unannounced. As he stood knocking at their door, Plaiew and her lover were at wit’s end – if the two men met, there would surely be bloodshed. So Plaiew had her lover climb onto the balcony adjacent to theirs. Had he slipped, he would have fallen to his death.

Plaiew gulped back her herbal whisky as she spoke. I hadn’t quite grasped what she was on about. I didn’t quite believe all of it. And why was she throwing back herbal whisky like some village grandma? I hadn’t yet asked when my vengeful cousin-in-law abruptly ran off into the bathroom. I could hear her moaning, much like a cow being slaughtered. After a few minutes of this, she flushed and groaned. When she came out, she was practically on all fours and alarmingly pale. But on her face was a smile of relief. She seemed to have flushed away her sorrows.

“It’s out. It came out.”

It was a voice drained of worry. It took me a while to realize what she meant. I have to say I lost my faith in her after this. This woman must have felt such vengeance for my cousin to do what she did. But what of her unborn child? Would it know anything of their vengeance? It had lived for a month or two in her womb. Now it had to die because of some adult “game”?

We were now into the third month of my job hunt. All the businesses I had applied to were still blissfully unaware of my situation, which had hit rock bottom. After such extended stays with my sister and cousin, I suspected their resentment. Not only was I staying for free, I was leeching on them. They covered my transportation costs, not to mention food. I was truly grateful for

all this. I tried my best to be frugal. Unless absolutely necessary, I never ventured outside.

After some thought I realized I could not prolong my stay indefinitely. I gave it one last try and dropped off my application at one other magazine. Funnily enough, I was asked to prepare a writing sample. I was to interview anyone I wanted and bring that in, which I did: I settled on a topic, interviewed my eldest sister and delivered this as my assignment. I was still waiting to hear back from them when I heard from my younger cousin, who lived with her husband in northern Isaan. The Non-Formal Education Centre in her province had put out a call for volunteers to enter a one-month training programme, after which we would be hired to teach sign language to the hearing impaired in various districts.

I was torn. Not long after this, I received a call from the magazine. A female journalist asked me to come in and accompany her for an interview. She gave no indication whether I had been hired. It was a terribly painful moment. I was at a loss what to do. If life was indeed a game, I would be what the pros call a “pigeon”, a loser before the cards are revealed. But this hardly mattered. What was eating me up was something I had learned from the past months’ trials and tribulations in the city.

I looked at the lives of others, their urban struggles, their cut-throat rat race. Where was happiness in all of this? Everybody went through life hiding behind a mask. Husbands and wives readily betrayed each other. Temptations abounded. With my mind unequipped for such turmoil, my faith in humanity was shattered. Perhaps I had been looking at life a little too naively. But as humans we can never read anyone else’s game. Suffice it to say I threw my cards on the table, putting an end to my “big city game”, and returned to find my footing in Isaan.



Elite Creative

Agency



A photograph with fellow sign language trainees.
(The author is seated second from left.)



When not attending classes, hearing-impaired students gather for a lesson in handicrafts.

To the Cursed Village

I returned to Isaan in high spirits, having heard the NFE was looking to train their first batch of sign language teachers for the hearing impaired. We could be employed right after training, without any gruelling exams. It was a pilot programme aimed at creating educational opportunities for people with disabilities in rural areas.

I was overjoyed and promptly left my troubles behind in Bangkok. Arriving back at my village, I had hardly unpacked when it was time to hoist up my bag for the next adventure.

During the month of training I stayed in a residence for the Department of Accelerated Rural Development, where my uncle was an employee. He was stationed in another district at the time, and the house was left unoccupied. He readily agreed to my stay, which helped lessen my expenses. Each morning I joined his daughter, a fellow trainee, for our daily commute. She was married and lived with her husband's family four houses down.

Through my training I came to know "Teacher Phol", a 58-year-old hearing impaired man whom the NFE had invited as its speaker.

Teacher Phol told us he had lost his hearing as a child. His father had sought treatment at various hospitals. But to no avail. Teacher Phol was soon confined to his own silent world. He learned by trial and error and painstaking lip-reading.

Even so, he did not give in to fate. He studied diligently and graduated from a high school for the hearing impaired. From his teenage years, Teacher Phol was determined to do good. He

devoted himself to the cause of the hearing impaired no less rigorously than a social worker. He later founded a foundation to aid their plight.

When the training ended, we had to select our district. There was talk of a village with a particularly high number of hearing impaired. There was not much interest in the village, since it was far from town. Most trainees were locals and preferred to be stationed near their home. As an out-of-towner, I did not have as much say. I had come this far, I thought. They could send me off anywhere they liked. I was a total idealist at the time. I wanted badly to make a difference. And so I chose that middle-of-nowhere town that the others had tried so hard to avoid.

Teacher Phol mentioned having visited the hearing impaired at this village. He confirmed they lacked educational opportunities and badly needed our help.

I was reminded of my mother's words: many people in this world lack access to an education. Ignorance confines us. In the old days, people learned from nature and from their elders.

In undeveloped rural areas, people might stray down an unrighteous path. They need decent role models. Or it will be easy for them to justify their behaviour as the norm.

We may differ in our appearances and our circumstances. But as humans we need routine checks and regular spring cleaning. Education, no matter its form, disciplines thought and points the way to a righteous path.

The period of my life as a volunteer teacher got off to a rough start. Before I could begin teaching, I had to first visit the village. I knew no one in the area. But I did know a college friend who lived in the neighbouring district. I gave her a call and set off to meet her the next day. She agreed to drive me to the village on her motorcycle.

We approached several villagers. But they saw us as strangers and did not trust us. Hours passed before we were eventually led to the community leader. His report to us was half-hearted at best. Despite the high number of registered hearing impaired residents, those of working age had gone off in search of employment. It would be difficult to put together a class. But still I had my hopes. Once the classes started, many might return.

After this brief survey, I took leave of my friend and headed straight back to town. I was running low on money. And my parents had agreed to bring more. I was to report to the district's NFE director the following Monday. The intervening three days was a time I will never forget.

I could always handle hunger. But this time it taught me a lesson or two. After spending ten baht on the call to my mother, I had only two baht left. With hunger nibbling at my stomach, I shrugged off my pride and teetered off to my cousin's. Her family and her mother-in-law were home. They told me she was still at work in a Vietnamese shoe shop. She was letting them walk all over her, said her mother-in-law. A college graduate slaving away at a shoe shop, barely earning a hundred baht a day.

Her mother-in-law then unleashed the tale of her family's hardship. Money was hard to come by. She had to take out daily loans and pay exorbitant interest. It was the only way she could keep her curry rice business afloat. She borrowed something every day. On days when she could not pay the interest, her lender would chase her down and insult her, humiliating her in front of the entire neighbourhood. On days when the lender did not lend, she could not sell her rice and curries and could put no food on the table. They were already exhausting her husband's civil-servant salary as their debts were deducted directly from his account.

When her tale ended, I gulped. I was full of pity for her. My

own discomfort paled in comparison. I politely took my leave and headed back on an empty stomach. In the night, I lay in pain. When I woke the next morning, the pain had not subsided. I drank glass after glass of tap water, which did nothing. I even meditated. If I could just concentrate on my breath, perhaps I could forget the hunger. Unfortunately my body refused to comply.

I sat racking my brain. What could I possibly do? It would be two days before my mother arrived. I had turned the place inside out, rummaging for any vestige of food. It had been a while since my uncle had lived there. He did not leave much besides pillows, blankets and some dishes.

Why did my life always take such turns? Could it not be smooth sailing like everybody else's? I was being tested so severely. Did God want to teach me something?

I wanted to distract myself and began to amble. I stepped behind the house for some air. My eyes fell on a tattered burlap sack in one corner of the old kitchen. Inside it was a handful of blackened grains of mouldy rice. My heart pounded as if I had discovered a sack of gold. "This will hold me over," I thought as I scurried back with a cup. My hands were shaking. Perhaps from hunger. But just as likely from giddiness.

I gave the grains a thorough wash. I had to devise a way to start a fire. There was not a single shard of coal to be found. So I took some newspaper and splintered wood from the fence and prayed the rice would cook through before the fire went out. I sat guard over that pot of rice as if someone might come and steal it. It was a funny sight. But all I wanted to do was cry.

Once the rice had finished cooking, it retained no flavour. This was unfortunate since it was a strain of glutinous rice. I gathered up my last two baht and made my way to the village shop for salt, which sold at two baht a pack. I sprinkled the salt and hoped the

rice would be edible.

My hand trembled as I held the spoon to my mouth. Darkness was slowly approaching as grain after grain slid down my throat. Out of nowhere, I could feel the tears rolling down my face.

During this time, nothing went according to plan. There was no point in anticipating anything in advance. Things had a way of not turning out as they should. Our salaries had not yet trickled down to the provincial office. The district director suggested I could teach the non-hearing impaired. In the interest of my livelihood, I accepted a post at the Community Learning Centre and was soon stationed in one of the villages.

There were several volunteer teachers already stationed at the sub-district. But since many new programmes were being introduced, the NFE was hiring CLC teachers to help ease their burden. As it was, the volunteer teachers were constantly overwhelmed.

I wasn't close to anyone in the village except for "Phi Da", a volunteer teacher I stayed with while my own residence, a former health station, was being cleaned up for my arrival.

The months spent alone in an abandoned health station at one end of the village were as eerie as it sounds. I never managed to get a full night's sleep. The compact wooden house, with abundant signs of termites, shook at the slightest wind. I never walked, but tiptoed, afraid the house would cave in on itself. A glance at the locks on the doors and windows confirmed they were in terrible condition. The house was much like some elderly man slowly succumbing to his death. Everything was in disrepair. The toilet often clogged. Fixing it all up would have been beyond my abilities and certainly beyond my budget. I bought no furniture and repaired nothing. My bag was packed and ready to go.

After classes at the CLC, I drove through the surrounding villages on my motorbike. I wanted to gauge the number of hearing impaired. Around ten had remained in their villages. This was sufficient for a class. Where there were multiple disabilities – a student could be deaf and missing his limbs – or where a student was too young to attend classes, I would tutor them in their homes.

It was on these excursions that I learned of a curious superstition. The villagers believed their hereditary disabilities could be traced to an ancient curse.

The agricultural fields in these parts had long been plagued by crows. The crows ravaged vegetables and rice seeds. In turn, the villagers retaliated. Some made strawmen in their likeness. Others fashioned traps from fishing nets and dealt with what they caught in brutal ways.

A relative of a hearing-impaired resident spoke of their common ancestor. Each morning, he left for the rice fields with a packed lunch. After half a day's work, he was ready for his meal. But each day, the crows descended and left him with nothing.

This never failed to make his blood boil. Until one day he prepared a noose.

He caught many crows and tortured them in cold blood, binding their feet and propping their throats open with sharpened bamboo sticks. He then released them.

Alas! The crows flapped and fluttered. But it was all for nothing. Their tightly bound feet and the sharp stick prodding out of their throat ensured their defeat. They soon plummeted to their deaths.

The man and his wife later bore many children, one of whom was born deaf. The same was true of his descendants.

What confirmed the superstition was perhaps the sound made by the hearing impaired when they attempted to speak. What we

hear bears no resemblance to human language, but to the “caw, caw...” uttered by crows.

Modern science may have traced the disability to genetics. But many villagers were not so eager to shake their age-old beliefs.

This illuminated a certain connection between the past and the present. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the crows. Humans had sown the seeds of their mistakes. They now reaped what they sowed.

After one semester at the CLC, I finally received the go-ahead from my programme coordinator.

In my one year teaching at the sub-district, my worst complaint was not poor communication with the students but the fact that we were so thoroughly unequipped. With inadequate accommodation, we were constantly moving from place to place.

My months at the health station filled me with anxiety. I kept imagining someone would break in and try to hurt or rape me. Once I got to know more people, I began spending some nights with the nuns at their temple and at the homes of my students.

Riding my motorbike on the way to the villages, I thought of the lullaby Oh, You Lemon-yellow Oriole. At times, filled with pity for myself, I would belt out into the breeze:

“Oh, you lemon-yellow oriole, where will you sleep tonight?

Any place will do. Many nights, you make your bed out of brushwood.

As a light breeze blows, you will come to rest in your nest.”

In the monsoon season I rode through rain and mud. In the summer and winter I braved clouds of red dust along the pockmarked roads.

I worried my motorbike would break down somewhere. Help was out of the question. The land flanking the road from my village

to the NFE Centre in town was densely forested. Cars rarely passed through here. Villages were built kilometres apart. All I could do was pray.

I carried with me a secret weapon. I had a box cutter which never left my side. I wore long jeans and a thick jacket, even in sweltering heat.

But my most eccentric method of self-defence was shunning all forms of cosmetics. The uglier I looked the better. I was close to a nun, who acted as my source of intel. She alerted me to news of glue-sniffing village kids and meth-heads, out to mug others to feed their habits and rape young women.

I never let my guard down. I knew that if my life was in danger, my loved ones could not cover the hundreds of kilometres to save me.

Luck was on my side throughout my time in the sub-district. Once the villagers got to know me, they became especially kind and eager to help. Even a few meth-heads put their palms together as a sign of respect when I rode past.

Perhaps I had karma to thank. I had done some good for the villages and the temple. When not teaching, I painted signs with Buddhist teachings which were hung on trees inside the temple.

I collected donations from villagers and colleagues for a new well. The nuns had been drawing water very far from the temple. One of the nuns blessed me:

“From now on, your life will be calm and tranquil, just like the water you gave us.”

This endeavour taught me about human interdependence. Harmony is the one strength no other animal can replicate.

My life as a volunteer teacher soon came to an end. I no longer saw everything the same way. The longer I stayed at the village,

the narrower my world became. This was due in part to boredom and my less-than-adequate income.

I sent off part of my salary to my parents. I also had to pay for my motorbike and other living expenses. I was often hungry and relied on meals at the temple, courtesy of the nun. I thought endlessly about my livelihood. When would the month end? When would I have paid off my motorbike? In some months I had to borrow money.

Worst of all was our lack of resources, including teaching equipment. We worked hard to provide opportunities for our students. But it was nowhere near enough. Students were scattered throughout remote areas. Those with disabilities had an even poorer chance at an education.

We once received orders from the provincial office to round up a group of hearing-impaired students. Some organizations were interested in inspecting the class. We hustled to achieve something close to respectable. Students from all villages were gathered at the sub-district's temple, which was arranged to appear as their classroom.

This could not be further from the truth. We usually met in the outdoor seating area under the home of one student, where I taught the alphabet from a textbook, much like in primary school.

My experience pointed to a glaring problem. We were not doing our adult students much good. What they needed was social equality, good careers and the opportunities available to their able-bodied peers. Instead we were force-feeding them our way of thinking. And we never bothered to find out their needs.

“We may be deaf. But we have our own culture. We have needs just like everybody else. We don't like being called ‘deaf mutes’. Nobody likes it when people point out their insecurities.”

Teacher Phol had warned me about this. He was afraid I might

let slip the offensive “deaf mute”. The hearing impaired share a set of customs, of which most of us are oblivious. We lack effective public communication on the issue. This is why we have such a hard time communicating with them.

If we could only keep an open mind and not be intimidated. Non-sign language users could write their thoughts on a piece of paper and express their amiability by smiling. Sign language users could gesture carefully to not risk being misunderstood.

Everyday communication is plenty complicated. Speakers of the same language often fail to understand each other. Why should we expect any different from a community that relies on sign language?

While getting to know Teacher Phol, I did not understand sign language. I felt extremely uncomfortable. I tried my best to catch what he said. But I saw no meaning in it, only a silence which resonated through the air. After knowing him for some time, I began to learn something which extended far beyond the “silent world”.

The world is not unlike one infinite school, full of things to find reasons and solutions for. We are not only born to learn more about ourselves. Those around us also provide interesting lessons.

Each of us is not the sole centre of the universe. We are surrounded by friends, not unlike our bodies’ organs which function in a concerted effort... We are born to learn about each other and support each other as we forge our way through life.

Teacher Phol told me about his wife, who was also hearing impaired. She waged battles for the rights of the hearing impaired until a stroke ended her own life under the age of forty.

Her efforts led to changes in the community within Thailand and around the world. As years pass, in communities near and far, voices demanding disability rights will always resound.

For weeks I lay thinking about my place in all this. I could continue to teach and subsist on my meagre income. But I didn't feel I was being much help. If I were to choose my passion, perhaps I could make a difference.

"If you think journalism is the right path for you, don't waste any more time here, my friend. If you keep doubting yourself, when can you even begin?" Teacher Add, a fellow volunteer teacher, said to me one evening. We were at a gathering at a student's home on the edge of the fields. His few sentences strangely kindled my courage.

"I'm not sure, my friend. I could quit. But I may never get the career I want."

"You won't know unless you try," he said.

I peered into the darkness that had descended around us. Within that darkness lay paddy fields full of newly planted rice. A few of the stalks looked as if they were ready to keel over. Instead they stood firm, eager to take their obstacles head on. With any luck, they might live until the harvest, when their yield was sure to gladden the farmer's heart.

I have learned there are four things we can never take back: our time, our opportunities, our words and our actions. Many are not free to choose their own path. Some lack access to higher education. Others choose to remain in their hometown, either for the sake of their ideals or their family.

As for me, I was still searching for my life's "stage". My soul was desperate for a way out. It longed to flutter its wings towards inner freedom, as bravely as others had.

I looked back from my birth to the time our family lost everything. Our land, our beloved grandfather and our kind and loving father. What was left was a stranger who loved the taste of

alcohol and had a nasty temper.

I had no earthly possessions to lose. Only a chance to follow my dreams and attain humanity's greatest gift.

As a teenager, I learned something from two lessons which occurred simultaneously: the story of Dad who lost everything and that of Grandfather who took his leave with nothing.

There is nothing out of the ordinary about these incidents. They are in some instances almost a daily occurrence. But life never clarifies itself to those who refuse to listen. Some will always suffer when life throws them an obstacle. Their mind is undisciplined. They are unable to comprehend the world around them.

Dad spent his life chasing after earthly possessions. In the end, he never truly owned them. What little we had later changed hands in an endless cycle of sin. The moment we lost all hope, Grandfather's death came knocking and illuminated everything... Those possessions we struggle so hard to attain. We can take none of them with us into death!

These truths impressed themselves on my feeble soul... Nothing on earth was more precious than humanity's greatest gift. We must strengthen and purify our minds. It is the direct path away from the grasp of demons and the source of all sorrows and temptations.